

**Development of English Language Education in Ethnic Minority Groups in
China: Actual Situation and the Problems Concerned in the Case of Inner Mongolia
Autonomous Region**

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Abstract:

Since the establishment of the People's Republic, China has undergone various changes in language policy, both in standardization of indigenous languages of ethnic minority groups and enhancement of foreign language education. Until 2001, bilingual education through Mandarin Chinese and Mongolian had been the main focus of language education in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. However, after English Language Education became compulsory in China, little attention has been given to the issue of foreign language and trilingual education at China's ethnic minority schools. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the influence of English language education in Inner Mongolia. This paper considers the impacts of current English Language Education and identifies key problems faced by the ethnic Mongolian school system. This paper is based on an original primary research with students through a questionnaire survey. Briefly, this research finds that current English Language Education impacts on ethnic Mongolian students, but also have broader implications for the use of the Mongolian language in China.

1 Introduction

The People's Republic of China (hereinafter, China) is an ethnically diverse country, with around 55 different ethnic minorities making up 8% of the population. Regions home to large bodies of ethnic minorities are designed as autonomous area, of which there are 5 autonomous regions, 30 autonomous prefectures, and 120 autonomous counties and banners. These autonomous areas are granted freedom in their choice of religious practice, and the writing and language that they use. Such areas will also have ethnic minority schools. Since the establishment of the People's Republic, China has undergone various changes in language policy, both in standardization of indigenous languages of ethnic minority groups and enhancement of foreign language education.

In 1978, China adopted a policy of Reform and Opening to open the country. The country moved away from its socialist economic organization, towards a free-market economy. In 2001, China joined the WTO, and its rapid industrialization continues unabated. However, the sudden economic boom has caused wide gaps in regional wealth throughout China, and figure from 2004 shows that of the 31 province-level administrative regions¹ in China, a ten-fold gap had opened up between the per capita GDP of the richest, Shanghai, and the poorest, Guizhou². These Autonomous Regions are at a geographical disadvantage in terms of poor trading locations, and this issue of the widening economic gap with other regions is thus a serious one. In recent years the problem has only accelerated, as the coastal areas continue to enjoy booming economic growth. Areas predominately populated by villagers, and by ethnic minorities, are being left behind; some have not even managed to achieve universal compulsory education. By contrast, urban areas are developing ever more competitive education system, and high-level English language education³ is being introduced into the school curriculum from elementary level, as a necessary skill needed to participate in global economic competition. This suggests that such regional gaps will only increase exponentially in the future. This paper will examine the case ethnic Mongolian schools in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Before English language education⁴ became compulsory in all junior secondary education, in 1992, most of those schools had carried out no foreign language education. Despite this, in 2001 it was determined that elementary schools children in grade 3⁵ and upward should also learn English at school. Much hope has been placed on the potential that learning English will have for economic development in the regions. At the same time, however, the native Mongolian language is suffering a decline in popularity within the Autonomous Region; the scope of opportunity to use Mongolian has narrowed, and more and more Mongolians are moving away from ethnic education. This paper seeks to clarify the details of the dilemma that exists between language education – posited as an effective tool in narrowing economic

¹ China has 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions = (ethnic minority region) and 3 municipalities.

² See China Statistic Yearbook, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2004. The per capita GDP for Shanghai was 36,533 yuan (1yuan = 15 yen), and for Guizhou was 3,504 yuan.

³ The system allows schools to teach other foreign languages. Since, however, the vast majority of schools opted for English, this paper refers to 'English Language Education.'

⁴ The system allows schools to teach other foreign languages. Since, however, the vast majority of schools opted for English, this paper refers to 'English Language Education.'

⁵ In some schools are from grade 1.

gaps – and ethnic education, and examine the situation of ethnic minorities today, and the issues that they face, whilst maintaining a focus on the retrenchment of ethnic minority education that can already be seen.

2 Locating the Issue

2-1 Ethnic Minority in China and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region

Linguistic diversity is a distinctive feature of Chinese national minorities. The Hui and Manchu nationalities have adopted Mandarin and are using the Chinese writing system. The rest of the 53 minority groups speak more than 80 languages. Among them, some groups speak more than one language. Twenty-eight minority groups have their own written languages; half of them are using two or more written forms. Mongolians, Tibetans, Uyghures, Kazaks, and Koreans have used written languages for many centuries,

In the schools in the ethnic minority schools, bilingual education has been practiced since the 1950s, when the ‘Bilingual Education Policy’ was introduced, which facilitated teaching in both the Chinese and the relevant ethnic language. In addition to this, then, 2001 saw English language education added to the elementary curriculum. One of the political objectives sought by ‘Bilingual Education Policy’ was to encourage greater unification throughout China through a common language, thus making it easier for central government to manage and control ethnic minorities. Much previous has highlighted the difficulties of bilingual research in autonomous regions (Okamoto 1999, Ogawa 2001, Shoji 2003, Haserdeni 2005).

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region was established in 1947, and its total land area is a massive 1.183 million km². In 2005 its per capita GDP is 9,037 yuan, putting it at 14th out of the 31 province-level regions. 2005 saw the national per capita GDP average break the 10,000 yuan mark for the first time, standing at 10,488 yuan, slightly more than that of Inner Mongolia.

Figure 1 . Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region



The total population is 23.32 million, of which the majority is Han Chinese (79%), with Mongolian next⁶ at 17%. The area is also home to other ethnic groups, such as the Manchu, the Hui, the Korean, the Daur, the Ewenki, the Oroqen and the Tibetan, but recent years have seen a sudden shift in population, with an ever increasing number of Han Chinese. In parallel with this population shift, the scope in which the Mongolian language is used has declined, and already 12% of the ethnic Mongolian population is not able to speak Mongolian (Hurelbaater 1997). The 'Inner Mongolia Project for the Mongolian Language' was established in 2004 in an attempt to improve the condition of Mongolian, but according to a report published by the 10th Inner Mongolia Standing Committee in November 2007⁷, the situation for Mongolian has not improved.

China's education system is centralized, and is unified throughout the country in a 6-3-3-4 year system. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, therefore, also follows this system. The level of universal education is high compared to other regions, with figures showing that 365,000 children were enrolled in elementary

⁶ See the results of 5th National Census (2000).

⁷ See the Inner Mongolian News Net, one of the national news agency (www.nmgnews.com).

school in 2003, an increased of 43,000 from the previous year. The enrolment rate for elementary school is around 98%, and the drop out rate just 0.04%. 99% of elementary school students continue to junior high school, which is higher than national average levels. Half of students who graduates from junior high school continue onto high school, and 14% of these students will attend university or vocational college. The region has two major types of schools: Chinese schools, for Han Chinese children, and ethnic Mongolian schools, designed to cater for the Mongolian population. Of all the ethnic Mongolian schools, 7% have adopted an “Extra Mongolian Language Classes” policy. The population of education is an issue of national concern, and Inner Mongolia – which has a comparatively low level of unenrolled children – is no exception to a trend which has seen the rapid establishment of Chinese schools, which are able to secure both teaching staff and teaching materials quickly and easily, in an attempt to increase the number of students going onto the higher levels of education. Policy measures have indeed managed to encourage growth in the enrollment rations, the flip side of this seems to be a drop in levels of interest in, and loyalty to, education taught using the Mongolian language.

According to 2003 figures, the children attending Mongolian schools made up for 44% of the total ethnic Mongolian population, and over half of these children were not being taught any classes in Mongolian. At present, more and more Mongolian children are opting to attending Han Chinese schools, for such reasons as the burden of a bilingual education in both Mongolian and Chinese, the lack of scope for using the Mongolian language, and the overwhelming dominance of the Chinese language at the junior high and high school stages. We can only expect, therefore, the proportion of Mongolian Children not receiving any education in their ethnic language to increase (Hurelbaater, 1997). Learners are determining that, since the importance of Chinese only increases the longer they are in school, they should only learn Chinese in the first place. Indeed, the subjects taught in Mongolian at higher education levels are extremely limited, with almost opportunity in the natural science. As such, it seems that learners who are keen to progress to further education would do well to equip themselves with proficiency in Chinese from the earliest stage.

2-2 English Language Education in China Today

English was first taught in China in 1862, when the first specialist foreign

language school was opened. Until then, English was taught in a limited numbers of urban schools, until the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. At this meant the advent of a socialist system, most foreign language education focused on Russian, although English was re-introduced to urban junior high schools in 1958, as a means of learning science and technology. During the Cultural Revolution the use of foreign language was strictly limited, meaning that English was no longer taught. After the Cultural Revolution, however, and with a series of reforms seeking to open China up to the outside world, English language education experienced a boom in popularity. In 1980, Shanghai, Tianjin and Beijing all introduced English into their elementary curriculums in quick succession, and in 1992, as a part of the reforms designed to ensure nine years of compulsory education for all Chinese, foreign languages were introduced as a compulsory part of the junior high school curriculum. Although the language could be chosen freely, in reality there was a strong focus on English. In 2001, as part of the New Curriculum Reform, English teaching was introduced into the elementary school curriculum, and at present China is home to an extremely high level of English language teaching (Okihara, Azuma: 1999, p.45-51). For an example was can turn to data from the 1980s, examined by Kurihara (2005), which compared the average number of English words used in English textbook used in China and in Japan. Whilst the average total for 6 Japanese textbook considered was 13,307 words, the Chinese textbook featured three times that number, at 40,929. Moreover, since 2000, would-be Chinese university students have been required to gain at least 4 in the College English Test (of which there are 6 levels in total, 6 being the highest) in order to graduate. If students wish to continue to Graduate School, or to study English as a major, they are required to attain the highest level⁸ possible. Throughout university education in general, the learning of languages is considered important, and many students opt to take English classes, studying for around 300 hours a year, and taking classes taught in English (Kasuya, 1999).

Table 1. Terms of language education in China's compulsory education (after 2001)

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
	Elementary school						Middle school			High school			University			
	Compulsory education															
	The terms of learning English and Chinese in Chinese schools															

⁸ See Overview of English Language Policy in Universities, Education Department, 2000.

However, as noted previously, it is certainly not the case that anyone and everyone is able to enjoy this kind of high level English language education. In the Autonomous Regions, which we look at next, greater emphasis is placed upon learning Chinese, which functions as a common language between ethnic minorities, than on other 'foreign' languages. Many regions have no history of foreign language education, and are in a stage of development when compared with urban schools, many of which have over 50 years of accumulated know-how on teaching English.

3. Issues of Trilingual Education in global context and in Inner Mongolia

Before English language education became compulsory in all junior secondary education, most of those schools had carried out no foreign language education. In 1992, education in foreign languages was made compulsory in all Chinese junior high schools. With few exceptions, however, almost no ethnic Mongolian schools had undertaken any such foreign language teaching until that point, their focus having been firmly on Chinese language education.

Research into trilingual education is a very new field; however, many scholars indicate that we are stepping into tri-multilingual stage since 1990s, and it is historically different and globally influenced. So, what social conditions does this stage correspond with? It should be cast upon the modern condition known as Globalization. In over 30 regions throughout EU member countries are using a combination of ethnic language, national language and English, as part of efforts to both respond to newly multilingual environments and revitalize inter-state movement (Beetsma, 2002: p.11). In Japan, there are many immigrant schools like Chinese schools and Korean schools conducting trilingual education programs to teach the mother tongue, the official national language and English. And in recent years, most of the Southeast Asian countries are conducting English Language Education, and some recent research indicates that indigenous people's mother tongues are impacted negatively very much within this multilingual language teaching environment. Then, in the following section, we will see some early findings on the current situation of English language education and the problems faced by the ethnic Mongolian schools within the trilingual education system.

4. Preliminary Research Findings on the Actual Situation of English language education in Inner Mongolian ethnic schools

So far we have seen the case of English language education conducting in China. However, after English Language Education became compulsory in China, little attention has been given to the issue of foreign language and trilingual education at China's ethnic minority schools. In order to consider the impacts of current English Language Education and identifies key problems faced by the ethnic Mongolian school system, a questionnaire surveys and field work research has been done in March and August in 2007. The research examines the coverage of English language Education, Mongolian students' motivation and awareness of English learning, satisfaction at current English classes. This research aims to clarify the current situation of English Language Education in ethnic Mongolian schools, and give suggestion to improve the English education quality within the minority education system in Inner Mongolia. An analysis of the current situation followed by a discussion of the impact of English language education and trilingual education system will be given as bellow.

4-1. Subjects

397 respondents (209 boys, 188 girls of 6 classes) were approached through the ninth and tenth grades in middle schools and high schools in ethnic Mongolian schools, and most of them were from pastoral area and countryside throughout Inner Mongolia.

4-2. Problems seen in the research

(1) The low spread and the variation of English language education

Table2. The Starting Grade of the English language in Inner Mongolia

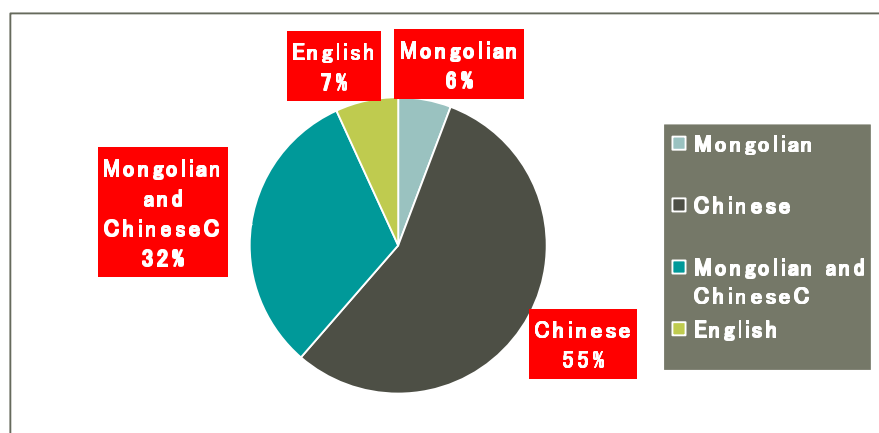
the year begin to learn English	before elementary school	from elementary school	from middle school	after middle school
percentage	1.7%	14%	41%	42%

In 1993, the Inner Mongolia Bureau established experimental courses for ethnic Mongolian students in the Foreign Language Faculties at the Inner Mongolia Normal University and the Tongliao Ethnic Normal College (now Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities), and the courses were recognized officially in 1997, constituting therefore the establishment of the first English Language Teacher Training Course. 2001 saw English language education added to the elementary regular curriculum as part of the New Curriculum Reform in China, and it is highly and quickly spread in urban areas. It was determined that elementary

schools children in grade 3⁹ and upward should also learn English at school in Inner Mongolia. Compared to the 100% of coverage in urban areas, Inner Mongolia's situation is quite different (see table2). And these figures are vary from the areas throughout Inner Mongolia—the proportion of urban area is higher than village and plains. Despite this, the number of teaching staff capable in English remains insufficient, and English language education in most Mongolian schools is carried out – by necessity – in Chinese, meaning that the popularization of English language education in villages and plains is falling behind.

(2) Unclear standard of medium language

Figure 3. The Medium Language Used in English Class



As the pie chart above shows, Chinese medium or Chinese-Mongolian medium English class is most popular in ethnic schools nowadays. In previous section we have seen that Mongolian language education and language use has declined within the bilingual education environment; however, it seems the addition of English Language Education has made the situation become worse than before. Because of the unclear standards of English Language Education, there are many gaps existed now. If we look at the pie chart, we can see that most of the English classes are conducted in Chinese language but not in the mother tongue. Therefore, that means that ethnic Mongolian students have to master the Chinese language completely for learning English.

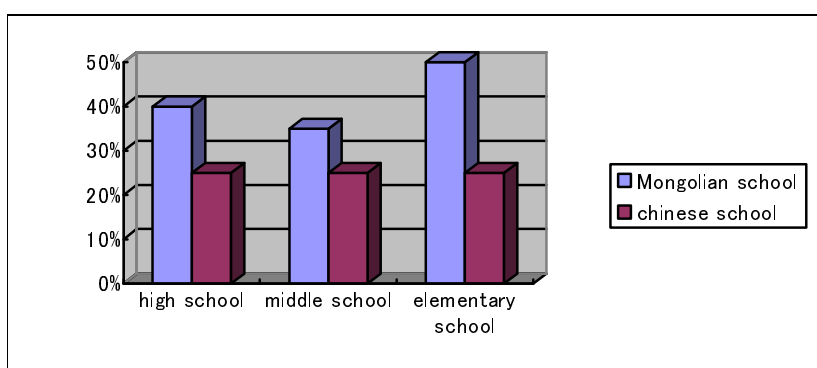
Much effort was given to make English compulsory, but not to consider a proper way for teaching minority students. As a result, the schools had no qualified teaching staff or relevant teaching materials, which meant that, as an interim

⁹ In some schools are from grade 1.

measure, English language came to be taught in these schools via the students' second language of Chinese. If students are to be taught English in Chinese, then it is inevitable that children attending Chinese schools will be in better position in terms of mastering English, and this could in turn lead to their enjoying more employment opportunities in the future than their peers who graduate from ethnic Mongolian schools.

(3) Overburden of language education

Figure2. Language Class Proportion in Mongolian Schools



Together with the delay in the establishment of an infrastructure for English language teaching, such as securing sufficient teaching staff and developing appropriate teaching materials, there remains another issue for the learner: namely, an overburden of language education. In ethnic Mongolian schools, classes on Mongolian and Chinese had taken up around 30% of the overall school timetable, but with the addition of English this bias towards language learning has become even more pronounced, with around 40% - 50% of al class time being used for language education. Many ethnic Mongolian schools have taken to securing the number of hours needed for bilingual education by reducing class time spend on the Mongolian language.

(4) Overload on Mongolian School Students

The overburden of language class results to overload on Mongolian students and shortage of non-language subjects. The students in this research use half to 2 hours to review their English course after class, and this review time take 30% to 70% of their review time. What's more is over half of the students give up their English course in the early stage of high school, and the reasons of this result are 'I

couldn't understand Chinese completely, so I couldn't understand a English class', 'I am not good at Chinese grammar, so I couldn't understand the teacher's explanation of English grammar in Chinese', 'I didn't have enough time to review English at middle school, so I couldn't catch up with the contents now', 'I like English, but it is hard to understand. Especially for some of the grammar, we even haven't learnt them in Chinese grammar, nor in Mongolian grammar'. From the students' talk, we can simply conclude that there are many inconsistencies among the three language education in ethnic schools in Inner Mongolia. The shortage of Mongolian language classes leads to students not learning enough grammar knowledge of Mongolian, and this matter directly influences the understanding of other language classes like Chinese and English, or even subjects beside languages.

There is much of merit to ethnic minority populations in learning Chinese, and it can bring about closer communication and exchange with other regions, thus assisting in economic development. Proficiency in English can, in the same way, contribute to the development of Autonomous Regions, and has the potential to become a useful tool to in facilitating greater participation in the global economic market. However, if ethnic minority schools keep this situation up, we never see how English Language Education could be a good thing in narrowing gaps between regions, and the trilingual education may also lose its meaning.

5. Discussion: Towards the improvement of English Language Education in Mongolian schools in Inner Mongolia

In the previous section, we examined what the actual situation of English Language Education is rising in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region through a questionnaire analysis, and that ever more ethnic minority schools are facing some new problems and new challenges. English language was introduced to the school curriculum without ethnic Mongolian schools having the opportunity to make the necessary preparations, and they are finding themselves unable to teach it properly. In order, however, for ethnic Mongolian schools to function as educational institutions that are equipped to face the two biggest problems facing the region – namely the regional economic gap and the conservation of ethnic identity – they will have to embrace trilingual education in Mongolian, Chinese and English. In the subsections below, we will consider the prerequisites for the improvement of such English Language Education conducted in ethnic minority schools, and that can

also be part of the prerequisites for the realization for the trilingual education in ethnic schools. One of these is a common appreciation of the importance of Mongolian language education, and the other is the development of methods to successfully implement such trilingual education.

5-1. A Shared Appreciation of the significance of Mongolian Language Education

It is said that the clearer the purpose for learning a language, the easier it is to be successful in acquiring that language. In the US, bilingual education has been available to immigrants since the 1960s, and whilst the face of bilingual education has changed over the years, moving from a focus on maintaining the native language to obtaining the second language, the US has a firm policy of supporting the bilingual capabilities of all school children, including the children of English speaking majority. For Chinese ethnic minorities, over 50 years has passed since the implementation of the ‘Bilingual Education Policy,’ and the Chinese language ability of the ethnic population has shot up, which appears to have generated a skepticism towards the significance of minority populations learning minority languages, considering the overall dominance of the Chinese language. Suefuji (2002) refers to the “recovery of humanity” that learning one’s mother tongue can engender. Equally, the Education Committee of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress has given “valuing oneself” “self – esteem,” and “sense of pride” as reasons for learning one’s native language (Cummins, 2005). For many ethnic schools, fluctuations in the number of students are dependent on the economic value apportioned to their ethnic language, and that therefore, it is not enough to simply appeal to the fact that the language concerned is a native one. Therefore, in order to improve the situation in ethnic schools today, the reasons for ethnic minorities to maintain their native language skills need to be made clear. Interventionist policy designed to help conserve native languages needs to be introduced at an early stage, having consulted cases studies in which ability in native language has been successfully maintained.

5-2. Develop English Language Education methods within Trilingual Education

Without effective trilingual education there is the danger that schools will produce children improficient in any language and any school course. In order to avoid such an eventuality, we can say that a framework for effective trilingual education needs to be built. The teaching undertaken at ethnic Mongolian schools today is based on a nationality unified foundation, to which certain subjects, unique to ethnic schools,

have been added, such as the Chinese language. As such, learners can easily feel overwhelmed. It is not, however, the case that trilingual education per se is impossible to achieve. If implemented systematically it can stimulate the cognitive development of learners, and other benefits can include increased abilities to emphasize with other cultures. There has long been debate in the field of bilingual research about whether second and third languages should be introduced only after the first language has been acquired, or it is most effective to teach multiple languages concurrently, and there is no sign of a conclusive resolution any time soon. Neither argument, however, looks to deny the value of multilingual capability. Moreover, as Cummins has indicated, it is said that bilingual students are quicker to acquire a third language than monolingual students a second (2005, p.88-p.90). What this seems to imply is that trilingual education in ethnic Mongolian schools looks unlikely, given their current curriculum. What is needed are measures to adapt the education system in order that trilingual education might be effectively realized, and the development of appropriate teaching methods.

6. Conclusion

For ethnic minorities, obtaining practically very useful linguistic skills represents an important chance for social improvement. Equally, however, prioritizing economic development above everything else, and focusing only on those languages which will be effective in enhancing that development, could well lead to these ethnic minorities, faced with the difficulties of maintaining their own traditional culture, losing their very 'ethnicity.' This is the dilemma that all ethnic minority communities share. As we have seen in this paper, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is seeing a decline in the scope of usage for the Mongolian language, and an increasing focus on the English language, both within the context of an environment dominated by the Chinese language. The need to maintain Mongolian language skills is thus being called into question. This phenomenon, then, of the voluntary forfeiture of ethnic language as seen in this paper, is likely to continue as long as economic success in the free market economy continue to be valued above everything else, and it is thus conceivable that a similar phenomenon will be seen across the world, not just amongst Mongolian people.

The objective of multiculturalist policies has not been to assimilate the minorities into the majority, but rather to create a framework of education in which minorities can maintain and conserve their own cultures. Multiculturalism, however, may have overlooked the desire for assimilation into the majority that some minorities

may have. An examination of the question of what mechanism might bring about such a desire for assimilation amongst minority population goes beyond the remit of this paper, but what is certain is that, on occasion, minority communities will opt for assimilation with the majority rather than conservation of their own ethnic culture, and that this trend is likely to increase in the future. There is, therefore, an ever greater need to consider the voices of young ethnic minorities in the future, as it is they who will be responsible for continuing their cultural traditions.

Effective trilingual education, that can both encourage economic development amongst minority communities and preserve the unique characteristics of ethnic communities, is necessary if we are to ensure the survival of diverse ethnic cultures. Together with the insights gained in this paper, we would like to collect more qualitative data on the current situation in trilingual education in ethnic Mongolian schools, and examine more detailed proposals for policy in this area, keeping a firm eye on other international examples of trilingual education.

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